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AN
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ON THE
P R O P A G A T I O N
OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

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CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

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ON THE
PROPAGATION
OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

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REV. C. C. C.

A N
E S S A Y, &c.

AS Religion has an immediate reference to the Deity, we more readily look for divine interpositions in the perusal of ecclesiastical than civil history. Hence some have made the success of an opinion the criterion of it's truth, and inferred from the reception of a particular doctrine, that it has been established by the agency of God. The precipitancy of this conclusion will immediately appear, if we consider that any opinion, which has been received and established in the world, may plead it's success as a proof of it's divine origin; and that an argument, which can always be used by a fortunate impostor, can never be the distinguishing mark of a true Revelation. When we see a Religion established in the world, which has stood for seventeen centuries, and pretends to divine Authority, we are naturally led to enquire into the causes of it's first reception. For though a truth may descend from heaven, and yet be established by natural causes, still a miraculous propagation implies always a heavenly origin; and though revelation may be supported by many other proofs independent of this, yet as every argument of it's truth is of the greatest importance, they all should be carefully collected; that being pressed upon the unbelieving mind with accumulated evidence, they may act with full force and efficacy. When the great Au-

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thor of our faith unfolds those attributes of the Deity, which the wisest Philosopher could never discover, when he shews the nature of man, with the relations he bears, and the duties he owes to God and his fellow creatures, to a perfection, beyond what human capacities had been able to discern, we have the strongest presumption; that he, who spake as never man spake, was moved by the spirit of God. When we find every circumstance of his most holy life foretold by inspired writers, and behold a series of prophecies gradually unfolding a dispensation planned with the most unsearchable wisdom, and comprehending the beginning and end of time, we are struck with an evidence the most convincing and sublime. Or if we reflect on the miracles performed by our Lord, which, though proofs that the Father had sent him, are yet distinct from the subject under consideration, we cannot but acknowledge the presence of Almighty power, and adore the goodness, which always directed it to relieve the wants, and heal the infirmities of mankind. And if we enquire farther into the evidences of our Faith, we shall find that to these arising from it's pure morality, from prophecies already fulfilled or yet miraculously compleating, and from those miracles which attested the divine mission of it's Author, it adds the clearest marks of the interposition of God in it's first propagation. The truth of this remark will best appear from considering the state of the world at the promulgation of the Gospel. At the time, when it was first preached, the greatest part of the known world was united in one empire, and in each country modes of worship were established, with which the interests of numberless individuals were inseparably connected: Science too had arrived at it's full maturity, and opposed the pride of Philosophy to the preaching of the Cross, and that luxury and pomp, which is the common bane of highly civilized countries, could ill brook the simplicity and humility of the Gospel. Hence was the religion
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of Jesus despised always, though always convincing, persecuted always, though always triumphant, till after struggling against the opposition of the worldly minded, the pride of philosophers, and the power of princes, at the close of the third century, it had reached the utmost limits of the Roman empire.

Great as this event undoubtedly was, it will strike us still more forcibly, if we compare it with the apparent weakness of the means by which it was produced. Only twelve persons, and these deriving no authority either from learning or station, were intrusted with the extensive commission to teach all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Thus was the nature, and extent of their undertaking, expressly and fully declared to them. They did not begin with small designs, and afterwards enlarge their plan with their growing power; but from the first entrance on their important ministry conceived it to extend to every creature. Who, upon considering the greatness of the attempt, and reflecting upon the instruments employed to accomplish it, would have supposed the probability, or even believed the possibility of success? Not studious to mould their doctrines to the dispositions of their hearers, the Apostles taught, with simplicity and plainness, what they had seen and heard. They placed amongst their most eminent virtues, those qualities of the mind, which philosophy had always regarded with contempt. Humility and forgiveness of injuries, so grating to the ear of pride, were the dispositions they continually inculcated. They were possessed of no power to enforce, and no external splendour to recommend the religion they taught. To what then shall we attribute the astonishing success, which attended their ministry, but to the power of him, who hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty, and the base things of the world,

world, and things which are despised, yea, and the things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.

Yet notwithstanding this wonderful triumph of weakness over strength, and simplicity over worldly wisdom, there have not been wanting some who have attributed the rapid progress of Christianity to merely natural causes. We must therefore first shew the insufficiency of these, before we can assert that the Gospel was established by a particular interposition of God. A celebrated writer of the present age has endeavoured to attribute this amazing success to five causes, deduced from the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind. His first cause is "the inflexible and intolerant zeal of the first Christians, derived indeed from the Jewish origin, but purified from that narrow and unsocial spirit, which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses." That the Apostles were animated with an active and laborious zeal, we readily acknowledge, nor do we deny its influence in promoting the growth of Christianity; but we assert that it was in itself entirely inadequate to so great an effect, and must on some accounts have had a contrary tendency. Would a religion, which was itself, to the Jews a stumblingblock, and to the Greeks foolishness, be recommended by a zeal that immediately combated the prejudices of every nation? Would the Jew embrace with greater eagerness a new religion, because it abolished the ceremonies to which he was attached; overthrew his boasted preeminence over the rest of mankind, by admitting the despised Gentiles to an equal share of the divine favour; and blasted his lofty hopes of a temporal and triumphant Messiah, by exhibiting an humble and crucified Saviour? Or would the Gentiles receive, with partiality, a religion, which subverted whatever they had revered as sacred or holy, and refused to comply with their prejudices, or accommodate itself to their customs
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and inclinations? Besides, supposing it possible for the violent and unsocial spirit of the Jew to be purified into the amiable and liberal zeal of the Christian, yet, in accounting for that boldness and fervor which animated the Apostles, recourse must be had to other and higher causes, to a full persuasion of the truth of those doctrines they were labouring to establish, and the actual assistance of that spirit which was promised by their heavenly Master. Hence the same disciples, who, when left to their own strength, had been weak in their resolutions and wavering in their faith, denying or forsaking their Lord, on every appearance of opposition or contempt, as soon as they were endowed with power from on High, preached Christ crucified, that Rock of offence to both Jews and Gentiles, with a boldness which neither threats nor imprisonments could intimidate or restrain, and a wisdom which no one of their adversaries could gainsay or resist.

The second cause which this writer adduces is "the doctrine of a future life, improved by every circumstance, which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth." Had the Gospel held out the doctrine of life and immortality only, and not at the same time denounced the wrath of God against all unrighteousness of men; had it offered eternal glory to the sensual and profane, then no doubt all would have been disposed to embrace a religion so desirable. But when obedience was made the test of faith, and holiness the condition of acceptance, the hope of a promised heaven, whose happiness consisted in adoration and praise, would be but a weak restraint against the present allurements of the world, and the more pressing solicitations of sensual desire. Nor would the idea of the approaching dissolution of all things, which the Apostles however never favoured, or those terrors of future punishment, to which such powerful effects are attributed, have had the authority which Mr. Gibbon ascribes to them. The fear of misery

is indeed a powerful motive in the human breast, though from the experience of every age, it is shewn to be of itself insufficient, either to influence the belief, or correct the manners; for the populace of every nation, and in particular, by Mr. Gibbon's confession, that of Gaul, appear on whatever grounds to have been strongly persuaded of a future state before their conversion to Christianity.

Would then those truths, which the conviction of their own minds in vain opposed to the tyranny of the passions, have received greater force from the authority of men, who were derided or defamed as fanatics or impostors? Would they not either have been rejected with contempt, as the chimeras of a disordered intellect, or branded as the artful tricks of designing imposture, had not the word of truth which the Apostles directed to the outward ears, been aided by an invisible power, and inwardly engraven on the heart. Another circumstance to which we are referred as adding great weight to the doctrine of a future life, is the expectation of the millennium, a notion too imperfectly understood, and too partially received to claim much power of interesting the affections or influencing the conduct.

The third cause, to which we are directed to attribute the advancement of the Christian faith; is "the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church." And here we are entertained with a long account of the nature of these miraculous gifts, of their being needlessly conferred on women and boys, and withheld from saints in their greatest difficulties; we are assured, that, as these extraordinary powers have now ceased, there must have been a time when they were withdrawn from the church. That the recent experience of genuine miracles should have instructed the Christians of that period in the ways of Providence, and habituated their eye to the style of the divine Artist. But as this æra cannot be ascertained, we seem to be guilty of some inconsistency, if in
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the eighth or twelfth century, we reject the miracles which we had so readily admitted in the second.

Thus are we insensibly led to deny the miracles of the Apostles, and even of our Saviour himself. But would a false pretension to miraculous powers, which under more favourable circumstances has tended to overthrow an established Church, have advanced the infant one in that learned age in opposition to the prejudices and passions of mankind? That there have been forged miracles we do not deny, but would the experience of real ones have prevented their existence or promoted their detection? Would it not rather have disposed the mind to the more easy reception of the marvellous? And would not the known success of the genuine miracles naturally tend to encourage the imitation? When the laws of nature are apparently suspended, there is no other mode of distinguishing a human imposition from an exertion of divine power, than by detecting the fallacy. That our Lord and his Apostles did perform miracles, neither Celsus, nor Porphyry, nor Julian, have ventured to deny; and though many apparent miracles may owe their reception to the credulity or ignorance of mankind, yet there are some characters of truth which no art can imitate and no sophistry reject. To call from the tomb the putrifying corpse, to bid the blind see, the dumb speak, and the lame walk, and to say to the winds and waves *Peace, be still*, thus to command, and be obeyed, are actions, which God only, or those, who are commissioned by the power of God, can be able to perform.

As our author has declared it his opinion that the demand of a noble Grecian, to see a person who had been actually raised from the dead, was a reasonable challenge, he ought to have shewn that the evidence of prophecies exactly fulfilled, and miracles clearly attested, is insufficient for a rational assent, that the bishop of Antioch had a power of working miracles when he pleased, and that every

every one has a right to demand a miracle for his conviction, who is too obstinate or too indolent to examine the proofs of which he is already possessed.

In his fourth cause "the pure and austere morals of the first Christians," our author is peculiarly unfortunate, he has surely forgotten his design when he draws so gloomy a picture of this grand persuasive to conversion, as must effectually deter every one possessed of human feelings from entering into so rigid a community.

"The union and discipline of the Christian republic" is the last cause, to which the establishment of our holy religion is ascribed; but union and discipline, suppose a church already established, a work to which human endeavours have been proved inadequate; the very existence therefore of union and discipline implies the interposition of supernatural power. Harmony amongst it's members is undoubtedly the strongest cement of any society, but in the early ages of the Christian church we find too little of it's salutary influence; even in the apostolic æra divisions and hieresies found their way into it's bosom, and have ever since continued to frustrate the endeavours, and perplex the counsels of it's faithful ministers.

There are several circumstances in the administration of the church, which our author has either mistaken, or drawn from them a wrong conclusion. When he says that the later Christians were permitted to retain their worldly possessions, he seems to insinuate that the first Christians had been required to relinquish theirs. But the very passage in the sacred writings which speaks of this community of goods expressly refutes this supposition. The awful instance of Ananias remains a lasting testimony that the judgments of God were inflicted, not on those who withheld, what, while it was unsold was their own, and after it was sold remained in their own power, but on those who vainly and impiously endeavoured

deavoured to impose upon the spirit of God. But we may ask, admitting the fact, what consequences would ensue? Would not the rich be deterred from entering into a community which required so dear a sacrifice? and would not the disproportionate number of poor converts, by causing a scanty fund to be parcelled out into so many shares, destroy the value of each, and entirely remove the pretended inducement?

With regard to the penances inflicted on those who paid not the expected deference to episcopal authority, it will be sufficient to observe, that a discipline so severe was ill calculated to make profelytes to the faith it pretended to guard.

Our author esteems it a matter of surprize and concern, that some of the brightest characters, and most eminent authors, of those ages, neither received the faith, nor recorded the miracles of the Christians. Of concern it may be, but surely a matter of no surprize, that deeply engaged in philosophical researches, or surrounded with the splendours of a court, they should be unwilling to leave pursuits so soothing to human pride, and hazard their reputation for wisdom, by attending to the pretences of a faith, which was every where decried, or crediting the reported miracles of unlettered teachers; is it wonderful that men, who prided themselves in their fancied virtue, should reject a religion which degraded them from their godlike height, and taught them the mortifying truth, that all their hopes of acceptance must rest upon the merits and atonement of another? The limits of this exercise will not permit us to pursue farther the arguments of this author, but from a review of these several causes and of their utter insufficiency to produce so great an effect, or rather of the insurmountable obstacles they would place in it's way, we are led to this conclusion, that the Christian religion would never have made the progress which our author himself acknowledges it to have made, had not the same power from whom

it originally proceeded, been still present to support and assist it's ministers.

But while we contemplate the rapid progress of Christianity, and trace in all the circumstances of it the hand of the Almighty, aiding it's infant growth, the Arabian pleads the success of Mahomet as a proof of his divine mission. But success alone cannot be urged as an argument of divine interposition, since error has been too often and too fatally triumphant to admit of such a supposition; it is only when the degree or the circumstances of it are such as human efforts are unable to accomplish, that we can attribute it to the agency of God. Hence, though the disciples of Jesus justly appeal to effects which natural causes could never have produced, as proofs of a supernatural aid, the followers of Mahomet cannot argue from the rapid propagation to the divine original of their religion, till they have shewn the insufficiency of those natural causes which tended to promote it.

Let us then consider the rise of Mahometanism, and the circumstances with which it was connected.

That a single individual born in obscurity, and educated in dependency, should pretend suddenly to a divine illumination, and teach a new religion; that his pretensions should be acknowledged, his doctrines received, and himself idolized by the veneration, and supported by the arms, of thousands; that he should be enabled to extend at once his religion and empire, and establish a temporal and spiritual dominion which has stood above 1000 years, is one of the most striking events recorded in history. But wonderful as this success undoubtedly was, we shall find circumstances sufficient to account for it, if we consider the nature of the religion itself, the state of the times in which it took it's rise, and the means by which it was propagated.

The most striking feature in the scheme of Mahomet is it's conformity

mity to the preconceived opinions of particular sects. To the Jew he permitted and sanctioned some of their favourite ceremonies, retained the rite of circumcision, and acknowledged the inspired authority of Moses and the Prophets. With the Christian he allowed the divine mission of Christ, and the truth of the Gospel, and pretended that the end of his own coming was to confirm it's authority, and purify it from the pollutions it had contracted in the world. The doctrines, which he taught, were such as would be readily admitted by the people to whom they were addressed; he enjoined indeed many painful and rigorous observances, but these were chiefly borrowed from their former systems, and such as their prejudices would scarcely permit them to relinquish; for these severities however he made ample compensation, by granting in many respects an unbounded licence to their natural passions; the heaven which he proposed was suited to attract the desire of the sensual, while it promised a free and uninterrupted indulgence in their favourite pleasures. Such was the accommodating nature of the religion of Mahomet. But great as must have been the influence of a religion which found an advocate in almost every breast, it was still farther favoured by the state of the times in which it was promulged.

Christianity at that period had lost it's essence, and retained little more than it's name, the fundamental truths of the Gospel were neglected, and idle ceremonies or metaphysical subtleties substituted in their room; that love, which Christ had pointed out as the mark of his religion, was changed into inveterate hatred for trifling differences in opinion, and those powers of argument, which should have been exerted against the enemies of the Gospel, were turned against it's professors. Add to these evils that universal corruption of manners which rendered too plausible the pretext of Mahomet, that he was sent to purify religion from the pollutions

it had contracted by residing amongst men. The country also, which gave birth to Mahometanism, was of all others most favourable to it's growth; while every other nation, together with a settled form of government, possessed an established mode of worship, Arabia divided into a number of independent tribes admitted almost every variety of religious opinions. To a people thus circumstanced, a new religion is offered with the greatest advantage, it has no established system to overthrow, no interests of state which it must combat, how easy an admittance then would that faith obtain, which opposed not the prejudices of any, and favoured the natural inclinations of all. But planned, as the religion of Mahomet was, with the most consummate skill, and favoured by popular opinion, every effort of dexterity and enterprise was exerted to extend and establish it's dominion. His instructions were decorated with all the graces of poetry, and addressed to the imagination with the most irresistible eloquence: when sufficient numbers were attached to his party, he animated their minds with the prospect of exquisite and eternal pleasure, as the immediate reward of those, whose happy lot it should be to perish in the glorious cause. Thus joining the terrors of the sword, and the enthusiastic zeal of his followers, to the powers of oratory, he easily overcame the wavering resolution of those who opposed him, and having erected and established his throne, undertook the great work of refining the manners, and cultivating the genius of his subjects.

The Arabian, thus raised from barbarity and idolatry to light, and a religion, in many respects, truly amiable, exulted in the change, and national pride co-operated with private ambition in the prosecution of farther conquests.

Thus, though the rise of Mahometanism may be ranked amongst the most wonderful events recorded in history, it cannot be deemed supernatural; we are struck with the stupendous edifice, we wonder

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at it's sudden erection, but perceive the marks of human art and industry. The Gospel on the contrary, as a grain of mustard seed, which, is indeed the least of all seeds, but when it is grown, is the greatest among herbs and becometh a tree, increased from slender beginnings, till it overshadowed the greatest part of the earth; it's growth was rapid, though imperceptibly conducted, and effected by means which human capacity was unable to discern.

The religion of Mahomet was adapted to the prejudices of those to whom it was sent, that of Christ directly opposite to their darling notions; Mahomet built his mosque upon a vacant site, and raised a motley structure, decorated with the ornaments of every species of religious worship; Christ erected his church upon the ruins of the heathen temples, and instituted a pure and spiritual worship unlike to any former system. Mahomet appeared as a splendid conqueror; Christ as an obscure and humble teacher. Mahomet invited his followers to victory and honour; Christ called his disciples to persecution and contempt. Which of these religions shall we suppose then to have been established by the interposition of God? That, whose author appeared as a triumphant conqueror, whose precepts and promises were agreeable to the passions and expectations of corrupt nature, and which had no established system to overthrow? Or that, whose founder, by his lowly appearance disappointed the national hope of a temporal kingdom, so long, and so fondly entertained by the Jews; whose doctrines abolished the ceremonies of the Mosaic law, and overthrew the whole system of Heathen mythology; whose precepts were equally repugnant to the desires of sensuality, and the pride of philosophy, and whose teachers were poor and illiterate fishermen, themselves but just awakened from the dream of temporal dominion.

So striking a difference in their apparent causes immediately determines the judgment with regard to their hidden source, and as that
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system, which every circumstance favoured, needed not supernatural aid, so that, which was opposed by all, could not have stood without it: the more we contemplate the success of the Gospel, and seek for natural causes adequate to the effect, the more shall we be convinced of the necessity and reality of a divine aid. And may the ministers of our holy Faith, with joy, remember that the same power which aided it's first teachers is still present, and will be always with them even unto the end of the world; will support them under their difficulties, and prosper their endeavours in spreading the glad tidings of Salvation to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

The same prophecies, which foretold the birth of Christ, and drew, in such faithful colours, the history of his life; which represented him as despised and rejected of men; and foretold the obstinacy and dispersion of the chosen people; have declared also that the happy time will come, when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea. Having therefore such promises, let each of us endeavour to be an instrument in the hand of God in bringing to pass his gracious designs: millions of our fellow creatures are involved in darkness and error; what can be more worthy of men and Christians, than to rescue them from blindness and superstition, and lead them to light and truth? Great is the worth, and illustrious are the characters of those, who have delivered their country from dangerous invasion or the more ignominious yoke of slavery, but still more important are the services of those, who make an exalted station, and superior talents, subservient to the generous purpose of seeking and employing fit persons to publish in distant lands the Gospel of peace, and bear glad tidings of good things. Arduous indeed must be the task of extirpating the darling rites of idolatrous worship; yet, though our missionaries might not perhaps be able to prevail over the pre-
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judices of a whole nation, by confining their attention at first to a few individuals, they would insensibly engage their affections by acts of kindness, improve their understandings by frequent converse, and by gradually unfolding to them the whole scope and nature of the Gospel, instil into their hearts the love of it's author and zeal for it's success. Should these converts second the labours of our missionaries, we might reasonably entertain the most lively hopes, that when the natives of our eastern provinces heard the Gospel preached by their countrymen, every prejudice would quickly disappear, and the attention with which they would listen would authorise the most sanguine expectations of their future conversion.

The follower of Mahomet, who already acknowledges with us so many of the leading truths of the Gospel, might, by sober argument and the testimony of those scriptures, whose veracity he acknowledges, be convinced of the truth, and made sensible of the excellency of the Christian dispensation.

And the unhappy disciple of Brama might surely by attention paid to his particular prejudices, and due reverence to his sincere, though mistaken piety, be led to see the superior beauty of a religion, which inculcates inward piety and active virtue, instead of the absurd ceremonies, and useless austerities, of his own superstition. Would not thousands yet unborn, when they looked back on the intolerable yoke, under which their forefathers had for ages laboured, bless the generous exertions of those who had planned and effected their release.

Perhaps too if the light of truth once beamed upon our eastern provinces, it might be reflected with advantage to our own country, where it shines indeed, but too often with a barren lustre. The world is the great idol to which all bow, it's cares, honours, and pleasures, engross our first affections, and the pursuit of glory and immortality is esteemed only a secondary concern. But should the
Gospel

